REPRESENTATIONS OF AFRICA IN CONTEMPORARY BLACK BRITISH FICTION BY WOMEN

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Chapter Six

Conclusion

Our study has examined how for black British women writers Africa served as a powerful point of reference that shapes and redefines British literary imagination and facilitates the re-negotiation of Britishness. Displaced black migrants or their progeny are portrayed in black British women's novels, as suffering from a psychosis, highlighting isolation, loneliness, self-critique, denial, and self-doubt as their distinguishing features. This adds to the anguish of immediate, historical, and cultural separation from the homeland. Such migrants are perceived as being permanently bound in a state of exile because of the intense feeling of 'unbelonging' that they experience in their new country. This sensation of unease brought on by their displacement sparks a drive for self-discovery and a sense of belonging. Concerning this, the application of the trope of 'going back to Africa' or 'return' has been noted as a common feature in the novels of these women writers. The 'return' motif is also employed as an attempt to re-commence discussions of historical 'absences' of black British people. However, these writers challenge the gendered notion of homeland or nation constructed in black men's 'return' narratives. As a result, black British women writers' 'return' to their roots involves physical, metaphorical, and imaginary constructions of their homeland, which consists of both positive and problematic aspects. The study notes that what makes each of these black women writers unique is specifically the intricate ways in which they negotiate their roots and history. Hence, it is found that instead of a generational pattern, their writings evoke mutually contradicting ideas that evade the rigid compartmentalization of their works under a specific category. In fact, our study observes an overlapping of ideas and thematic patterns in the writings that allow alternative approaches to analysing the different waves of migrations/movements or displacements. As evident in the recent writings, the homogenous construction of cultural identities in Africa is always challenged. In this context, it has been observed that the writers' responses to the idea of 'home' and homeland are nuanced, evidenced by the fact that they have sometimes critiqued, commemorated, yearned, or sometimes completely disassociated themselves from it.

Thus, our study has observed that in the course of re-writing multiple pasts and histories, black British women's writings represent Africa in three broad different ways: Africa as a timeless entity, waiting for the present to take possession of it; Africa as a haunting past that seeks to possess the present; and Africa as an "indelible imprint" that is consciously embodied by the present (Williams 13). The thesis observes that by

perceiving Africa in these complex ways, black British women writers seek to resist the dominant discourse of race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and national belonging, but above all "*speak as 'British' identities with all the complexity, contradiction and, difficulty the term implies*" (Brah, emphasis original 174). Hence, the writers perceive more than one way to reconcile the "contradictory legacies of the past" that exist between Africa, the Caribbean, and Britain (Williams 190). The fact that the formulation of a coherent black identity is enmeshed with these complexities raises the need to re-examine the debates surrounding home, homeland, and belonging, which have been embedded with issues of race, gender, sexuality, class, age, and ethnicity. The racialised and gendered dynamics of constructing a homeland have been the primary vantage point for our study to understand black British women's writings, while also taking into account other issues and positionalities. The black British diaspora shares a complicated relationship with the motherland and black British women's writings express this through the symbolic arrangement of mother-daughter bonds, the lived experiences of their mothers, and themselves as mothers. This is the reason why our study has observed a recurrent stress in the writings on the aspect of family, marriage, and home-making with its complex undertakings in the building of a nationalist consciousness. The association of mothers and motherland has often been a representative focus in addressing notions of national identity and belonging. As Glenda Norquay has stated, this is because "when physical lineage is traced or valued, the figure and body of the mother become freighted with significance" (182). Particularly in terms of understanding the "spatial meaning-expansion of home", Carol Boyce Davies observes,

> …female elders are crucial links in its rewriting… whose presence or absence evokes a very specific identification and redefinition of the meaning of home. They become specifically gendered ancestral links in terms of knowledge of healing arts, survival skills for Caribbean [or African] women, nurturing, re-membering. (94)

As observed in Chapter Three, this is established in the prologue of *Ancestor Stones* when the narrator states that "stories that started in one place and ended in another. Worn smooth and polished as pebbles from countless retellings" (Forna 10). In the same way, Levy's *Fruit of the Lemon* too stresses the idea of remembering the past. Hence, Faith is seen carrying a "flat grey stone" from Fort Charles, coffee berries from a "stranded

bush", a "wooden plague with patios words and meanings" etc., as part of both her family and Jamaica's history, which "would not fit in a suitcase- I [Faith] was smuggling it home (322-34). In addition to it, the chopping board of "dark wood, light wood, white wood packed into a solid *mosaic*" that Auntie Coral sends for his sister in England indicates the creolised elements in Jamaican society (322). The metaphor of the 'mosaic' referred to here, can be associated with the idea of 'tapestry', 'patchwork' or 'quilting' advocated by black British feminists like Naz Rasool, Gilane Tawadros, and Anh Hua, respectively. These metaphors altogether refer to the notion of a transnational diasporic consciousness, as evident in black British women's writings, through a renewed connection with the motherland. Even in *Lara*, the protagonist's acceptance of her hybridity is evoked by the potent presence or memories of ancestral grandmothers who have been passing on their methods of resistance to the next generation. Here, the spiritual and mystical quality of Lara's great-grandmother, Servina, who undergoes different stages of metamorphosis and finally becomes a seed flowing in the ocean, has been seen as significant. Lara, as the interlink between the homeland and the diaspora, is supposedly birthed out of this seed while being part of the ocean preternaturally for six generations The metaphor of the waterbody in this way helps the narrative to embody the 'rupture' both through temporal and spatial shifts. Interestingly, the water also symbolises the womb of her white mother, who has ancestral ties not only in England but also in Ireland and Germany. With references to important Irish mythical icons like Kathleen Ni Houlihan and historical events in Ireland and Germany during the mid-19th century, like the Great Potato Famine, the rapid industrialization, and the Austro-Prussian war respectively, *Lara* broadens the concept of hybridity to a transnational domain. In doing so, Evaristo deconstructs the post-war development of 'Englishness' as opposed to black 'alien' cultures, by presenting the ethnic and linguistic dimensions. For instance, set in the 1840s Ireland, Catlin's (Lara's maternal great-grandmother) narrative reveals how Irish people differentiated themselves from non-Gaelic speakers like the English or the Saxons. Again, in Jackie Kay's *Trumpet*, when Millie is mourning Joss Moody's death, she consoles herself by contemplating how Moody would have wanted her to celebrate her death, "have a wee shindig", or even hire a Celtic band to play at the funeral (32). The use of the word 'shindig', which has roots in Scottish Gaelic, and the reference to Celtic bands state Moody's creolised identity as a black Scottish/English queer figure. Such problematisations allow us to re-think the essentialised category of 'white' and 'English'. The existence of multiple affiliations, in this context, is alluded to

in terms of a positive reclamation of roots. In his memoir, *The Black Gold of a Sun,* Ekow Eshun agrees to this by referring to W. E. Dubois's concept of 'double consciousness', and stating how it allowed black people to perceive their lives with an "acuity white people could never muster. We watched for the bigotry cloaked in humour and the hesitations in speech that betrayed hostility. We used double consciousness to survive, ultimately thrive, in the white world" (214-5).

However, protagonists like Lara also express the dilemma of possessing roots in diverse cultures and histories: "Living in my skin, I was, but which one?" (Evaristo 69). While situating the positive aspect of multiple pasts in a feminised, domestic space of the homeland, black British women writers also represent its problematic side. As seen in Diana Evans' *26a*, the overwhelming presence of cultural trauma causes an obstruction for Georgia in establishing her black British identity. Here, the maternal source of support that connects diasporic individuals with their motherland, is not only ruptured due to displacement but also by Eurocentric and patriarchal factors. In relation to this, though Irenosen Okojie's *Butterfly Fish* also carries the narrative of Africa as a haunting past that possesses and disturbs the present, our study has focused on the aspect of reconciliation achieved at the end with the protagonist's healing from her physical and psychological issues. The brass head that links Joy's strange isolation from the social world with her mother's traumatic past in 1960s London and that of Adesua in 19th century Benin, suggests an inter-generational cohesion that is achieved in the novel through the use of other objects like – a green palm wine bottle, an old brass key, and the azalea flowers – that travel across or repeatedly appear in different time frames. Though there is a disorientation in this connection at the beginning of the novel, the narrative unifies the tripartite link through the use of a magic-realist form. In Diana Evans' *26a* and Helen Oyeyemi's *The Opposite House*, the use of magic realism owes no reconciliation for the migrant characters because of the disconnect with their maternal roots. As discussed in Chapter Four, a failed 'return' to the homeland is symbolic of the disrupted longing for maternal bonding. This is why the characters in the novels not only lack a safe space of 'return' through their mother's pasts but are themselves dysfunctional as mothers. In the case of characters such as Georgia in *26a*, an unforeseen force of melancholy and despondency regulates her life since the time of her birth. Thus, by focusing on historical and cultural possession of the present by the past (both associated with the slave trade), the writers acknowledge that "homing desire" and the

subsequent feeling of 'homelessness' in the black diasporic migrant, emerges as a dominant precondition that regulates a writing on 'return' (Hua 32). As far as Oyeyemi's novel is concerned, the reference to Yoruba gods and goddesses coalesces with black historical ties in Cuba and Britain that obscure Maja's route to self-discovery. Through her remembrance of childhood memories in Cuba, Maja seeks to draw her connections and create an 'imaginary homeland' but is obstructed due to the fragmentation of those memories. The recurrent appearance of the twins during her sleepwalk, the existence of multiple pasts, and her migration from Cuba to Britain, are a cause of that fragmentation. In the novel, Oyeyemi critically engages with the concept of hybridity and black women's inability to connect and identify with a particular culture.

At times, black British women writers also have negotiated with their past by inheriting the traditional cultures from the earlier generations and re-formulating, re-inventing, and locating them in the 'home places'. The instances of such re-invention in the novels of black British women writers are demonstrated through a conscious remembrance of an individualised past that might have been distorted by the process of migration. This is elaborated in Chapter Five, where the study has examined the possibilities of 'return' and constructing 'homelands' beyond the African/Caribbean setting. In such cases, the recollection of history is expressed through embodied experiences of black, queer migrants in the urban spaces. Since family structures have broken and memories of the homeland only remain as fragments, the characters are found establishing new definitions of family lineage and formulating a hybrid source of ancestral origins. Moreover, the crucial association of dance and music is used here to indicate the notion of performance, where blackness and queerness intersect and allow for alternate means of home-making practices in Britain. In such a context, the idea of what it means to be African and at the same time British, Welsh, or Scottish, is intermixed with assumptions as to what one is not. Charlotte Willaims in her memoir *Sugar and Slate* (2002), also hints at a related idea when she states that: "Ma staked out this territory [Beit-eel, a small seaside town on the northern fringe of Wales] for us on the edge of a town like maroon community" (35). By critically perceiving both the Self and the Other, Williams sees "Africa with the eyes of Wales" (33). The unfamiliarity of the term 'black' in Llandudno, Wales, where she grows up, and the absence of her father is juxtaposed with African artifacts in their living room- the *Ogboni agbada* that hung in her mother's bedroom door and the *Moonlit* painting drawn by him. Williams translates

it as her mother's Africa that exists in Wales. In context to this, we can refer to the celebration of Willaims' sister Janice and William Housley's marriage as mentioned in the memoir. Williams states that her sister's marriage is followed by a dance and music ritual performed by the family members and guests alike, whereupon they invoke the gods/ "deities of the ancient kingdom of Oyo" (63). Williams describes the event as affecting her perception of 'self': "Great libations were offered to the invited ancestors. The spirit of Wales was dancing with them and within this great celebration I was being created more whole" (63). She particularly situates her search for identity in differentiation with her father's, who, according to her had "rejected Wales but not the western in him" (43). In this context, the image of the Lobo that she mentions, as the savage spirit in contrast to the civilised one Lionel, stands as a vital part even in establishing a Welsh/British identity. Here, instead of choosing one cultural identity over the other, she problematises the concept of cultural hybridity where 'differences' intermingle, influence, and are enmeshed within each other. Throughout the memoir, she reiterates the definiteness of fragmented selves for displaced individuals and the constant process of re-inventing one's identity. Hence, we can refer to Hall who states that "identity is always an open, complex, unfinished game – always under construction… it always moves into the future through a symbolic detour through the past" (362). Though Hall makes this statement primarily in connection to the Caribbean as that 'symbolic detour', the study asserts that there are various other detours that black British women writers have been exploring to justify their hybrid, in-between or liminal transnationalities. Accordingly, the fact that that 'home' can be any physical or imaginary, temporary or permanent, definite or a continuously changing space is consequently highlighted in their writings. Following in the footsteps of her father and going to Africa, then to the Caribbean, Williams realises that an authentic Lobo can never really be experienced because it is 'necessarily mixed', just as there is no option to experience Africa in its 'originary' nature; it can only be imagined. Moreover, the fact that Willaims uses the flag of a Fante tribe on the cover of her memoir which was published in 2002, speaks of the beginnings of race discourse in the context of Britain changing its direction to politics of ethnicity. Likewise, in Ekow Eshun's memoir, his exploration of the socio-political history of Ghana along with his memories of both Ghana and Britain, also subtly projects his insistence on his Fante origins even though he projects himself as an outsider to it most of the times.

Hence, in most novels instead of stressing on one moment of 'return', the focus is on the idea of repeatedly returning to the same, yet transformed spaces i.e., an Africa which is embedded in Britain itself. With a similar tone, Ekow Eshun notes in his memoir that "You never truly leave home" (210). Nevertheless, as Charlotte Williams mentions, the study asserts the existence of not one, but different, multiple Africa(s) just as "England is made up of many Englands" (Evaristo 450). In fact, in *Girl, Woman, Other*, Evaristo re-writes the historical conception of Africa by ascertaining England as primal and similarly Penelope's journey, to the farthest part of the country, as stepping back to "pre-civilisation" (451). Again, it can be stated that the "unconscious but indelible imprint" of Africa that Williams talks about, is part of a "body map" that is simultaneously both familiar and strange to contemporary black British women writers but embodies and adds deep meaning to their existence and their imaginaries of home and belonging (13). In Nadifa Mohamed's *Black Mamba Boy*, Jama's character gives an instance of a 'body map' embodying the lives and experiences of Somalians like him whose life dictates a constant movement. The tattoo of the black mamba that he gets at the end of the novel, before returning to his wife and his newborn son, signifies that his journey has come to a "full circle", suggesting what Hall considers, a "cyclical and anachronistic structure of a double inscription" (Matzke 214, Hall 49). Again, in Sarah Ladipo Manyika's *Like a Mule Bringing Ice Cream to the Sun*, Morayo's understanding of race and ethnicity in terms of her body is manifested through her interest in tattoos. Besides symbolising one's historical lineage and ethnic difference, 'body markings' also suggest an individualised form of self-fashioning that is part of a collective history. In the same way, Joss Moody's dead body in *Trumpet* embodies the untold stories of displacement and survival held by black, queer immigrants in Britain. The story, thus, as Clair Wills puts it, "is not of immigrants as 'dark strangers', or still less, 'bloody foreigners', but of the lives lived and imagined by immigrants themselves. Put bluntly, not how did they appear to the British" but how Britain and their sense of self have undergone a transformation through black 'presences' (xxii).

The transformations are made evident in the novels through the exploration of liminal spaces, situated within the fabric of a British setting, which indicate the possibility of interweaving diverse cultural, racial, and ethnic confluences. The voyages undertaken beyond Britain (both fictional or real), as seen in Evaristo's *Lara*, *Soul Tourists,* or Johny Pitts' *Afropean*, take into consideration other alternative possibilities

of re-thinking the idea of home and belonging. For example, *Lara* ends with the eponymous protagonist locating a Chinese eatery in Manaus, a city in Brazil, and replenishing "my banana self on noodles" (Evaristo 188). When she is back in London, "across international time zones", she promises to "wing back to Nigeria/ again and again" (188). This is a distinct declaration of maintaining connections with her homeland, which Michael Pearce states is the most important aspect of the concept of transnationalism. Similarly, even in *Soul Tourists*, Stanley finally reconciles with his past and his relationship with his father, only after he realises that his identity and his historical legacy are defined by plurality. When he sees "two scouting swallows tear through the membrane and flutter off, dip into the curve of the Gulf, disappear over the Arabian sea and towards the concave mass of the Indian Ocean", he accepts the fact that he cannot be bowed down to one definite and absolute idea of 'roots' (Evaristo 281). He considers this image as a sign that proves to him that "the earth's eternal centrifugal force is holding [his] world together" (281). In *Afropean*, Pitts deals with the idea of formulating a diasporic or transnational black identity through the use of photographs taken during his travel across diverse spaces in Europe. Such attempts enmesh blackness into the European identity and suggest "the possibility of living in and with more than one idea: Africa and Europe, or, by extension, the Global South and the West, without being mixed-this, half-that or black other. That being black in Europe didn't necessarily mean being an immigrant" (Pitts, Introduction). Following Pitts' concept of an Afropean identity, Afro-diasporic women across Europe are inventing new terms to define themselves and their community. In Alice Diop's 2021 documentary titled *We* (*Nous*), which captures the voices of black women from the inner cities and suburbs of Paris, terms such as 'Afro-descendant' are used. The documentary itself is a critique of French society but also documents the changes it has undergone over the years. Diop's method of enclosing personal histories and half-remembered or fractured anecdotes is an attempt at re-writing the history of the city by paying a tribute to the everyday lives and struggles of the immigrant black communities. Again, Siana Bangura, a black writer and performer from London, believes that terms such as People of Colour (PoC) or black, Asian, Minority, and Ethnic (BAME), not only homogenizes black people but also "enforces a 'minority complex' and reinforce the claim that White is superior" (Adegoke, *Loud Black Girls*). Hence, she suggests the use of the term 'Global Majority Peoples', keeping in mind its relevance to diverse populations in the African diaspora. By challenging the limitations of multiculturalist politics that dwell on the coercive integration of migrants

to the host country, black British women writers suggest alternative ways of creating a sense of belonging that accepts differences and perceives oppression from multiple subject positions. The writers also suggest a focus on other histories and pasts embedded in geographies beyond Africa and the Middle Passage, caused by varied waves of migration of black people to different parts of Europe. In this regard, the study considers the development of black British writing as the stature of a new aesthetic that covers diverse issues across the African diaspora. In context to this, to get a wider perspective of Africa's significance in the construction of a global identity, the study seeks to open up the discussion for research of works by Francophone-Caribbean writers like Maryse Conde, Simon Schwarz-Bart, Myriam Warner-Vieyra, Afro-German writers like Olumide Popoola, Sharon Dodoua Otto, and Afro-Dutch writers like Ellen Ombre, Simone Zeefuik. The study assumes that a comparative analysis of the works of these writers and black British women writers will augment the present scholarship, keeping in mind the growing interest in diasporic literature.

In addition to this, our study also seeks to open up the discussion for research on contemporary British writing by women of Asian descent as well, which will add to the discourse of race politics in Britain. Novels like *We Are All Birds of Uganda* by the Ugandan Asian writer, Hafsa Zayyan can be considered as an example to state how Africa functions as a physical and metaphorical space of 'return' and healing, even for people with Asian origins. While dealing with similar themes of identity crisis and unbelonging, Zayyan's work also grapples with the complexities of religious, generational, and cultural differences between black Asian and African people. The kind of mass displacement Ugandan Asians experienced during Idi Amin's Presidency in the 1970s and their return in the late 1980s with Yoweri Museveni's accession, complicates the idea of 'home' and homeland for different generations due to its effect on family structures. The aspects of family, marriage, religious beliefs, and domesticity form a common ground in Asian British women's writings too, like the writings of black British women. However, the cultural distinctions that the former group of writers expresses, despite similar experiences of discrimination, need to be contextualised and understood from an intersectional approach. Like in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, the aspect of multiculturalism is a common ground of criticism in Asian British writing too. Particularly post-9/11, the subject of Islamophobia has gained focus in the latter's works. For instance, Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) deals with the lived experiences of

immigrants from Bangladesh in the council estates of the multicultural area of London. Along with mapping the locality of Brick Lane, Ali meticulously projects this part of London as globally significant for Bangladeshis. Hence, there are elaborate descriptions of the protagonist, Nazeem, creating a romanticised image of her homeland through a recollection of her childhood memories. While the novel caused a huge controversy regarding the misrepresentation of Bangladeshis as regressive, it also hints at Ali questioning her idea of home and origins. Nevertheless, her novel revolves around the representation of racial and gendered dynamics where women occupy a position in the lowest rung of the socio-economic ladder. Likewise, mixed-race black writers like Sharon Maas of Afro-Caribbean, Dutch, and Amerindian descent, who had also lived in India, Germany, and then England, can be read as transnational writers who provide a contrasting portrayal of her multiple ancestral roots. The image of India, which is often associated with an element of opulence, is to be understood in congruence with Africa's image of alterity, while writers of both places are discriminated against and marginalized.

Besides, there are aspects relating to Brexit that have not been a part of our study but which merit further research. Then, the recent phenomenon of COVID-19 which claimed the lives of mostly the racially and ethnically marginalised people in the context of Europe has prompted black writers to reconsider and express the complexities of their identities as black and British. In similar terms, the present ecological crisis can also be studied to understand how structural issues in Britain disproportionately affect black migrant communities, because they are the ones who are mostly subjected to unhygienic, hazardous living and working spaces. With the death of George Floyd, the Anglo-European world witnessed the rise of a common struggle against black oppression through the Black Lives Matter movement. This was a pivotal moment for black politics in Britain because it united the marginalised individuals across the diaspora, despite ethnic, racial, religious, or sexual differences. To add to it, the geographical space of Africa has recently developed into a market for advanced capitalism. The evidence for this may be seen in the expanding commerce between China and Africa as well as the former's significant economic investment in the continent. Again, an important shift has occurred following Mark Zuckerberg's visit to Nigeria in 2019 to promote social media and digital marketing. These examples demonstrate how Africa is becoming more significant to the global economy and more visible on digital platforms, which contrasts

with its earlier marginalization and invisibility. Further research can examine how black women writers in Britain are grappling with these aspects and how they might be understood as another re-invention of Africa in the light of modern geopolitics.

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